

**“Just Like IRL”: Play, Spatiality and
Sociality in Online Fantasy Games.**

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Introduction: Enclosed Realities in Cyberspace?

The problem of understanding online presence, as a detached ‘cyberspace’ is probably best expressed in the groundbreaking work by Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Slater and Miller are insisting “[...] we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they can not escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness.” (Miller and Slater 2003 p5). This approach is in direct contrast with the earlier generation of writings on the internet exemplified in the case of MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) or MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) by Sherry Turkle, who suggests that the very existence of certain new information technologies like hypertexts can be understood as a demonstration of textual deconstruction *a la* Derrida (Turkle 1997 p17).

A peculiar breed of professionals preaching some rigid morals supported by sensationalist news outlets provides the opposite tendency in understanding new media like the Internet and video games. Where postmodernist intellectuals see vast opportunities for the rediscovery of the self, they see danger of enslavement to technology. The Miami attorney Jack Thompson is the leading voice arguing for the danger of video games; in an open letter he wrote to provoke the gaming industry he uses a notable language that almost grants free agency to inanimate video games: “This writer has been saying for seven years that violent video games can be “murder simulators” that incite as well as train some obsessive teen players to be violent.”(Thompson 2005)¹. On the other hand clinics specializing in ‘curing’ ‘gaming addiction’ are starting to appear here and there, replicating the tendency of psychology for “disciplining difference” (Rose 1998 p104).

The dialogue concerning online gaming appears to have two distinct fronts, bringing to mind the controversy between Boyle and Hobbes, which is outstandingly documented, by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer in their collaborative work *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Shapin and Schaffer 1985). On the blue corner is Boyle represented by Sherry Turkle and

¹ Jack Thompson *A Modest Video Game Proposal*, http://www.jackthompson.org/archives/index.htm#10_10_05_01

the postmodernist intellectuals claiming much like Boyle did for his air-pump that the emerging technology and new media are heralding the “*inlargement of the dominion the Senses*” (Shapin and Schaffer 1985 p36). On the red corner is Hobbes represented by Jack Thompson and the clinical psychologists expressing their worries about what they see as “some gentlemen proclaim the right to have an independent opinion, in a closed space, the laboratory, over which the state has no control” (Latour 1993 p20).

A fruitful approach that will grant the seemingly enclosed Internet communities their uniqueness and authenticity would have the flexibility to include the diverse range of activities the media involves, instead of looking at it as an indivisible monolith. The first step to understanding the Internet is not to contemplate how it alters human nature or how it fragments identity but to ask what the Internet is actually used for. The functions of the Internet can range from organising knowledge communities based around the spoiling of a particular TV show for the thrill of contesting the authority of major TV networks (Jenkins 2006 p43) to the facilitation of creating the Trinidadian identity (Miller and Slater 2003) or the humanization of the global economy (Hart 2000 p17). The Internet is a media with different contexts, which can (and perhaps should) be analysed separately without being lumped in together. In the case of Miller and Slater the context in question is the use of Internet within the national boundaries of Trinidad:

This ethnographic particularity- this focus on Trinidad, on the specifics of one ‘place’-is very far from a limitation, either for us as researchers, or you as readers. It is not only necessary [...] but it is also the only firm basis for building up the bigger generalizations and abstractions: quite simply one can use this particularism as a solid grounding for comparative ethnography. (Miller and Slater 2003 p1)

I fully substitute to the invitation for ethnographic particularity; additionally I would like to suggest that this particularity does by no means have to take a narrow definition of ‘place’ as a Westphalian grid chart. A broader conception of spatiality can be used to enrich the possibilities of comparative studies. During the time I have spent as a participant observer and the ‘real life’ discussions I have carried out with players of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW) I have acquired the impression that the various activities conducted in this space of which ‘play’ is the determining one can be taken as the legitimate markers of space. In any event I find the suggestion of space being fragmented by activity to be far more plausible than abstract notions of cyberspace which either herald an age of human transcendence or the

complete break down of society depending on whether one chooses to take Boyle's or Hobbes' side.

Methodology and Description

Before I continue with the discussion I have briefly introduced above I wish to introduce the premise of the fieldwork. *World of Warcraft* was released on November 23 2004 by *Blizzard Entertainment* as a part of their *Warcraft* franchise and is currently estimated to have 9 million subscribers worldwide. The game involves the creation of a character (aka avatar) in a server that consists of approximately 10,000 players when full, the player-controlled characters navigate within the environment and improve their strengths and abilities of their avatar by increasing their level (the maximum level at the moment is 70) once levelling is completed the players then focus on acquiring various goods that are considered valuable including but not limited to the in-game currency which is simply referred to as gold. The particular server where I have conducted my observations is a Europe based server with the official language defined as English (there are also German, French and Spanish servers available for other European players), the majority population being constituted by Swedes followed by the Dutch and eastern European players in turn. Two warring factions in accordance with the fictional lore of the Warcraft universe further separate each server. The other essential institutions within the game are the player formed associations known as guilds. Guilds are voluntary relations entered by players who wish to co-operate to achieve a certain end. I will briefly describe these activities, as they constitute the purpose of the entire community.

PVE- aka Player versus Environment is any activity that involves the players defeating 'mobs' i.e. computer-controlled characters. PVE seems to constitute the main motivation behind the formation of guilds and the majority of the co-operative activities between players. The 'loot' dropped by particularly difficult mobs (known as bosses) in particularly difficult dungeons can be equipped by characters not just to improve their abilities but also as an object of prestige within the community.

PVP- aka Player versus Player involves players from one faction fighting the other faction. PVP activities are often less complicated to organise and are

usually considered as a secondary activity.

Grinding- is the player given name to any activity involving doing the same task over and over again, this might involve gathering resources or using gathered resources to craft valuable items. Although some players enjoy grinding, most consider it a boring task and dismiss those who perform it for its own sake.

Slacking- anything that doesn't fit in the category of PVE, PVP or Grinding is referred to by most players as slacking (of which I was very often accused of). Spending time in busy places to socialise, being AFK (Away From Keyboard) or simply not logging on is considered slacking. Competitive guilds who need their players to be present for nightly *raids* (PVE events in large groups) or who demand that members grind resources to be prepared have no tolerance for slackers and remove them from the guild instantly.

The above list roughly summarizes the range of activities that are available for players; the next part of this paper will be a discussion of the theoretical issues involved in understanding online gaming, followed by the results of the fieldwork I have conducted.

The analytical impasse

Previously I have suggested the Hobbes-Boyle debate as a suitable analytical framework for understanding the controversy involving MMORPGs. The following section will be dedicated to the clarification of this analogy and the unique position of the anthropological approach.

The welcoming of the Internet as a case in point for the arguments made by poststructuralists and postmodernists seems to have created a brand new temptation of permanence. The ethnographic approach to the Internet has been quick to point out that the accounts pledging allegiance to Derridean deconstruction for understanding "virtual communities" is informed less by the object of study but by the demands of the intellectual project in question (Miller and Slater p5). The poststructuralist interpretation of the Internet has produced some outstanding research (Turkle 1997), and some ill-informed flamboyant suggestions that completely alienate anthropologists from the study of the Internet; here is one particularly abstruse and colourful remark to illustrate the logical extreme of what we are

dealing with: “The fact that one’s identity is often the product of society ceases to limit us here, because there are not many transgressive whims which could not come true on the internet” (Filicak 2003 p93). The interpretation of online games as a distinct space allocated for experimenting with diverse aspects of human existence or in other words as a Boylean laboratory is not restricted to the poststructuralist tradition, as a matter of fact some discussions either frequently take a contrary approach to the tenets of postmodernism (Aarseth 1997) or in some instances suggestions of deconstructed identity and such are simply irrelevant (Castronova 2006). Beyond deconstruction and postmodernity the main argument behind the Boylean approach is that games like *World of Warcraft* are experimental spaces and in some cases even extensions to medical laboratories for observing social behaviour in the case of epidemic diseases (BBC 2007).

Turkle’s *Life on the Screen* (Turkle 1997) is a study of early MUDs. Turkle describes her limited participant experiences on MUDs and carries clinical interviews with users (Turkle 1997 p16). Turkle substitutes to an approach claiming that “technology is bringing a set of ideas about postmodernism [...] into everyday life.” (Turkle 1997 p17) A great deal of her study is concerned about how simulation is increasingly being considered as real. She expresses a fascination with computer technologies that allow us to switch between activities by using simulated ‘windows’ which as implied by the single inverted commas is not an actual window but a representation computer users have come to take at “(inter)face value” (Turkle 1997 p24). This culture of simulation creates a ‘virtual’ space separated from RL (Real Life) in which “life is made up of many windows and RL is one of them” (Turkle 1997 p192). Turkle provides a very thorough psychological analysis of how users emerge as different individuals after their experience with the MUD, her discussion of how the users can “act out” or “work through” their individual difficulties and personal conflicts provides invaluable guidance for using MUDs as a therapeutic instrument (Turkle p200). What Turkle misses however is the actual motivation of the users to *play* MUDs. As the name Multi User *Dungeon* implies, MUDs are essentially online games in the tradition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. On the very few occasions Turkle refers to the gaming element of MUDs she considers playing to be learning by imitation, what is being learned is “to develop new dimensions of self-mastery” (Turkle 1997 p204). It is obvious that online games provide a wide range of possibilities for players to develop their personality or discover aspects of

themselves, however I can guarantee that none of the players I have met counted “to develop new dimensions of self mastery” as the reason they have started playing *World of Warcraft*. Hence I am convinced that the primary reason why players start playing and spend many hours in online games is the very real activity of *playing* which doesn’t by itself imply an element of ‘virutality’.

Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext* (Aarseth 1997) addresses to what has been missed by Turkle. The intellectual project of *Cybertext* involves the creation of a discipline (ludology) specifically dedicated to understanding video games. Aarseth suggests that the video game experience is a unique form of “cyborg literature” by its nature, which always implies the active participation of a user and a technology, and hence it is beyond a mere pastiche of “human literature” (Aarseth 1997 p134). When it comes to MUDs Aarseth argues that Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic capital” is not applicable:

“The use of anonymity, multiple nicknames, identity experiments (e.g gender swapping) and a generally ludic atmosphere suggests that the participants are not out to strengthen their position in society but rather to escape (momentarily) from it through the creation of an ironic mirror society that will allow any symbolic pleasure available.” (Aarseth 1997 144)

Contrary to Turkle’s account that misses the playfulness of MUDs, Aarseth is separating the game from the rest of society precisely by its very playfulness, which he refers to as the “ludic atmosphere”. Aarseth is pointing out the literary potential of a typical chat during a MUD session, with its unique language and rhythm, the implication is that MUD is the “medium that allows the freest experimentation with fictitiousness and personality” (Aarseth 1997 p149). The description of the MUD as a space where new discourse is manufactured through experiment parallels what Boyle was hoping to achieve namely: “an experimental space about which new discursive and social practices could be mobilized to generate assent” (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p49). The difficulty with both Aarseth’s and Boyle’s approach is the assumption that the ludic/experimental atmosphere of the MUD/laboratory isolates it from social phenomena such as symbolic capital. As a matter of fact the accumulation of symbolic capital within the game is a significant part of the game experience itself and contributes to the enjoyment of the players by providing a basis for competition.

The final account I will consider on the Boyle side of the argument is Edward Castronova’s *Synthetic Worlds* (Castronova 2005). Castronova is looking at how the economy of MMORPGs function. The purpose of Castronova’s argument is to provide an

account of what he calls synthetic economies as a legitimate economy. The increasing amount of time spent by players in these synthetic economies is considered as a form of migration hence the implication is that “synthetic worlds may eventually make contributions to human well-being that will be judged as extraordinarily significant” (Castronova 2005 p25). According to Castronova users consider migrating to synthetic worlds as an improvement in their welfare because “our economy is joyless” (Castronova 2005 p75). It is argued that the necessity of game economics to be fun puts synthetic worlds at a completely different footing from all previously existing notions of economics that rely on various philosophies of ethics like utilitarianism or Kantianism:

If the objective of game economic design is to provide a system that, rather than meet some condition of philosophical ethics, simply enhances the user’s fun level, that puts us at an off moment in this story. I Castronova, PhD Economist, with over a decade of experience writing teaching, and speaking about questions of Economics and Public Policy, must now answer the following question: What makes an Economy Fun? (Castronova 2005 p175)

Castronova draws a line between existing theories of economy and the economy of the synthetic worlds much like Aarseth does, that is by taking the element of play in MMORPGs and defining it as the sole attribute of this space. The Boylean implication of Castronova’s argument is more explicitly revealed to conclude a discussion on the innovative corporate organizations of companies that specialise in the trade of ‘virtual goods’. These companies provide improvements to the characters controlled by players; some may provide services for levelling characters to their maximum others also sell in-game currency in exchange for real currency. Castronova draws attention to the innovation presented by these companies by conceiving of MMORPGs as a “corporate petri dish”:

Indeed, we can and should view synthetic worlds as essentially unregulated playgrounds for economic organization, and therefore it is more than likely that if there are ways of running things that humans have not yet discovered, they will be first discovered in cyberspace (Castronova 2005 p168)

Unlike Aarseth, Castronova does not suggest that the ludic atmosphere of the MMORPG makes it exempt from social conventions like the accumulation of capital, on the contrary the specific focus on the economic aspect of the game allows a unique account that places the game within the general appetitive desires involved in all economies. However once more the online space is described like some sort of laboratory that not only allows for third party companies to experiment with new forms of corporate organisation but also on a larger scale

provides a basis for game developers to completely shake our understanding of what economy means by replacing conventional ethical philosophies as the guiding principle with a notion of fun and enjoyment (Castronova 2005 p174-175). Let us first clarify that enjoyment and fun can be conceived of as the basis of many ethical projects of which hedonism is one, what the economies of synthetic worlds do hence is not so much eliminate all pre-existing ethical guidance from the field of economics but replace it with ethical philosophies which might have been considered unconventional or inappropriate.

Another ethical project that would be considered almost as inappropriate as hedonism to provide guidance for mainstream economic policy, which assumes secularity as a given since the enlightenment is Islam. In a short essay concerning abstraction and substitution in Islamic banking Bill Maurer reflects on how the casuistic nature of Islamic banking opens the “gate of *ijtihad*” and constitutes the very nature of Islamic banking: “At any moment, Islamic banking is either the intellectual debates or the contractual practices” (Maurer 2005 p153). World of Warcraft and possibly other MMOs work much like the Islamic banking system. Although the synthetic economies of MMOs appear at first to be solely the product of game developers, players use online forums endlessly to debate whether the game is balanced or not. For example users who choose to play with a warrior might express discontent about the extremely high damage per second (dps) of mages as this situation disadvantages warriors when it comes to accumulating rewards provided by *PvP*, *PvE* or *grinding*. Many of *Blizzard*’s online forums are full of what is often referred to as ‘whine threads’, where players complain about their classes (the envelope term for warriors, mages etc.) being *nerfed* or how other overpowered classes should be *nerfed*, with *nerf* being a term of obscure origin meaning reduced in power. *Blizzard* often considers these requests and responds favourably to the ‘whine threads’ that have acquired the greatest support by addressing the issue in the upcoming patch. Maurer notes that Islamic banking hinges back and forth between the intellectual debates and the contractual practices:

“It seeks a unity, a moment where the Word has no business being adequate to any thing because it is perfect in itself, and a moment where the world need not approach the Word because it is already one with-not part of but homologous to- its oneness. In Islam, this scale of unity at every level of scale is called *tawhid*.” (Maurer 2005 p157)

I am arguing that World of Warcraft itself is trying to reach a *tawhid*, a moment of perfection when everything is balanced and players don’t complain about how difficult it is to play their

class. This rather lengthy comparison of the economy in *WoW* to Islamic banking was to respond Castronova's question, "What makes an economy fun?" Just like the process of *ijtihad* makes a banking system more *Islamic* so does the process of *whining* and not the experimental genius of the game developers that makes the economy of *WoW* more *fun*. The *nerf* debates overarch the game itself as a sort of meta-game where issues of justice and fairness are debated frequently. Altering the previous quote from Maurer one can say that at any moment playing *WoW* is either whining on the forums or killing ogres.

The common idea of all the arguments above is their vision of spaces created in online games as adverse to real life. It is automatically assumed that online games are some sort of a retreat an escape from something, such as the mortal coil of our joyless economy (Castronova 2005 p76) in favour of an economics of fun. Turkle even resembles these spaces to the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* for their tendency to "breed an easy kind of intimacy" (Turkle 1997 p206). It follows that these retreats have a purpose, they either lay the foundations for a radically different economic system or they allow safe havens for troubled individuals to experiment with their identity. In a sense all of these authors are looking at these spaces to find something of Boyle's laboratory in them. Thomas Sprat's words to describe the purpose of the Oxford group of experimentalists could be coming out from a contemporary Boylean account of MMOs:

Their first purpose was no more, then onely the satisfaction of breathing a freer air, and of conversing in quiet with one another, without being ingag'd in the passions, and madness of that dismal Age (Shapin and Shaffer 1989 p76).

The creation of spaces where individuals can be interpreted to be breaking away from society is a major concern for anyone who has a more Hobbesian outlook on life as it implies enclaves of people escaping the authority of the Leviathan.

We have discussed that the Boylean attitude to online games is to claim that MMOs create experimental spaces that are separated from the madness of our dismal age by the virtue of their 'virtual' substance. Authors taking this approach are naturally aware of the connection between the 'real' and the 'virtual', effectively the inevitability of having to prepare policy for synthetic worlds (Castronova 2005 p24) or the necessity to not abandon real politics in favour of utopian online democracies (Turkle 1997 p244) are concerns that appear quite often in the Boylean accounts. Nevertheless the Boylean way of understanding online games involves the study of how online games can enrich the offline world, such a

project obviously takes that there is a distinction between the two as a given.

The rivalling Hobbesian project also assumes that there is a distinction between life online and offline but it takes an adversary position to the Boylean's by focusing not on what the MMO adds to the 'real' world but on what it subtracts from it. The way Hobbesians bridge their primary assumption (which they hold in common with their adversaries) with their contrary position is to argue that although video games and online spaces are clearly distinct from each other in the eye of the rational impartial observer which expectably means a clinical psychologist, players are often seduced by the game and take it to be real. Rapidly emerging literature concerning how video games are responsible for the creation of: "armies of these very kids wandering through cyberspace mutilating and killing everything in their path- and having a great time doing it" (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p66) often point out: "Of course, we all realize that the images on video screens are just that, just as they are not real on TV screens; but the sophistication of this technology is making it hard to tell" (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p3). The interactive nature of video games combined with the exponentially increasing quality of graphics is causing the player to feel like he/she is the one killing and being killed (Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007 p6). These games are so convincing and potentially 'real' that players seem to be entering a "permanent state of arousal" (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p70). Clinical psychologists would even have us believe that even a short-term exposure to violent video games is responsible for raising the aggression level of the player by exactly 51% (Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007 p36). Similar accounts concerning 'internet addiction' also note a similar state of trance experienced by users:

To best focus on emotional triggers, the clinician should ask the patient "How do you feel when offline?" The clinician should then review the responses and determine if they range in a continuum of unpleasant feelings such as lonely, inhibited, worried frustrated or troubled.

The clinician would then ask the patient "How do you feel when using the Internet?" Responses such as excited, happy, thrilled, uninhibited, attractive, supported or desirable indicate that the use of the Internet has altered the patient's mood state. (Young 1999 p8)

Most of the *WoW* players I had the chance to observe and interview spend a great deal of their time in game performing excruciatingly repetitive tasks on a daily basis in preparation for their ultimate team effort. Depending on whether the collective effort has failed or succeeded

the players do certainly experience mood changes, however the suggestion that they are experiencing a “permanent state of arousal” during their daily *grind* would certainly cause much amusement.

The citation of these real effects like sensations of arousal, aggression and mood change are not aimed to explore the possibility of online spaces being similar to ‘real’ ones but to illustrate the magnitude of the user’s delusion. People who play video games or use the Internet at levels that are considered to be excessive are apparently doing so because they suffer from “maladaptive cognitions such as low self-esteem and worth, and clinical depression [...]” (Young 1999 p9). Essentially anyone who plays *WoW* for longer than it is considered ‘healthy’ is showing signs of potentially serious psychological disorders. It follows then that gamers turn to games like *WoW* to escape their very real problems, the false therapeutic appeal of video games is that “The player can escape life and be immersed in a constructed reality that seems to be totally in his/her control” (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p69). Such escapism often aggravates the condition of the patients until they are completely rejected by the other healthy members of their peer group. Here is what a particularly ill equipped laboratory based psychological study argues will happen once children who play violent video games are rejected by their peer groups:

Once rejected by the dominant peer group, these aggressive children are likely to form cliques with other aggressive children. In that subculture, the children will also be likely to reinforce each other’s aggressive attitudes, behaviours and media habits (Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007 p141)

Leaving aside the debate of whether the field of clinical psychology is qualified to make unsubstantiated claims on inquires that require participant observation and fieldwork I want to point out the difference between Turkle’s approach -which claimed that MUDs are therapeutic tools at best or a platform for the mere re-enactment of existing difficulties at worst- with the Hobbesian approach which prioritizes the possibility of the aggravation of pre-existing problems. I will attend the question of whether *WoW* players are all potential mental patients and the authenticity of the sense of control they get from playing, for now I just want to point out the difference between the existing arguments.

One of Hobbes’ major concerns about the air pump is whether Boyle’s contraption shows a space devoid of matter or not. Hobbes’ was worried that the theological implications of the debate concerning what sort of substance the air pump contained after all the air was

evacuated could serve the interests of false authorities seeking to damage the legitimacy of the sovereign. The experiments Boyle conducted in his laboratory space were perceived by Hobbes as the guarantee of perpetual disorder rather than a remedy for philosophical dissension (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p81). Hobbes' ontology relied on his social theory that "The 'Kingdom of God' was and will be on Earth, on His coming again" (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p96). "Hell and heaven were not places; they were states of mind or conditions of social disorder and order" (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p96). Hobbes thought that a place where metaphysical matters are investigated in isolation using the experimental methods caused illegitimate cultural resources to argue the existence of incorporeal substance (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p91). The danger posed to Hobbes' project by the possibility of incorporeal substances is evident, if enough people are convinced that such substances do in fact exist this would imply that there is a power greater than the Leviathan and the danger of the Leviathan being crushed by a delusional divinity would only benefit the clergy and the radical Protestants who followed the doctrine of private judgement that Hobbes considered as treason (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p103). Therefore spaces like the church or Boyle's laboratory had no right to erect boundaries from the authority of the sovereign to produce knowledge and exact belief (Shapin and Schaffer 1989 p104).

The backbone of the Hobbesian arguments concerning video games and the Internet has to do with the damaging effect these activities have on the fundamental institutions of authority. The negative effect of Internet use on the academic success of students is an almost ubiquitous object of emphasis in this line of thinking (Young 1996 p7, Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007 p33, Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p69) along with the destructive impact of cyberspace in the institution of marriage caused by the patients dependence on cybersex (Young 1996 p8). The interpretation of the Internet and video games as a substance with hypodermic qualities are aimed to draw a portrait of excessive users as 'homemade pseudosociopaths' (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999 p76) who not only harm themselves by becoming enslaved to contemporary technologies but are also damaging society by denying the goods provided by the liberating institutions of contemporary democracies and choosing to spend their hours in front of a screen. Hobbes' accusations against the English clergy for weakening the authority of the sovereign by using the experiments conducted in Boyle's laboratory as a basis for arguing for the existence of incorporeal substance (Shapin and

Schaffer 1989 p94) finds a parallel in Jack Thompson's accusation of the video game industry for insisting that video games have no effect on what happens outside the game itself. In an open letter, Thompson responds to the supposition of incorporeality in video games by suggesting a game in which the father (O.K) of child who has been beaten to death swears revenge on the video game industry:

O.K. first hops a plane from LAX to New York to reach the Long Island home of the CEO of the company (Take This) that made the murder simulator on which his son's killer trained. O.K. gets "justice" by taking out this female CEO, whose name is Paula Eibel, along with her husband and kids. "An eye for an eye," says O.K., as he urinates onto the severed brain stems of the Eibel family victims, just as you do on the decapitated cops in the real video game Postal2. [...]

How about it, video game industry? I've got the check and you've got the tech. It's all a fantasy, right? No harm can come from such a game, right? Go ahead, video game moguls. Target yourselves as you target others. I dare you. (Thompson 2005).

We have seen thus far that the property of the Hobbessian discourse concerning online gaming is based on the assumption it holds in common with the Boylean discourse, namely that spaces accessed through information technologies are distinct spaces separated from reality. Hobbesians however argue that although these places are not real they appear to be so to their regular users and thus result in the enslavement of these users by these technologies. This enslavement in turn leads to disastrous consequences for society in the form of reduced academic performance increased divorce rates and the growth of a generation of murderous youth. Adding insult to injury the video game industry is acting irresponsibly by arguing much like the English clergy of the 17th century for the incorporeality of video games. What we see here is the emergence of a new *machina Boyleana* that threatens the authority of the Leviathan.

The contemporary Leviathan however is a lot different from the sovereign Hobbes conceived. In his book *Inventing Ourselves*, Nikolas Rose describes what makes the contemporary Leviathan unique: "Governing in a liberal democratic way means governing *through* the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them" (Rose 1998 p155). The contribution of clinical psychology which most of the Hobbesian perspectives on the 'cyberspace' comes from is especially emphasized for its tendency to fabricate individuals with particular desires and aspirations (Rose 1998 p114). The citizens of western liberal

democracies have become increasingly reliant on these “experts of subjectivity” to manage their quality of life (Rose 1998 p151). Failure to become dynamic, autonomous ‘enterprising individuals’ is considered to be an obstacle for the smooth operation of liberal democracies and requires therapeutic assistance (Rose 1998 p158). Online video games enter the scene when these apparently failed individuals seek false remedies from artificial cyberspaces. For a regime of authority that problematizes organizations for their lack of enterprise (Rose 1998 p154) *WoW* surely represents an immensely problematic organisation due to its largely un-enterprising nature as a video game. The rejection of gamers to participate and be ‘autonomous’ is what worries the contemporary liberal democratic Hobbesian critiques of games like *World of Warcraft*.

In the above section I have attempted to summarize the existing debate concerning online video games. I have identified that there are two approaches to the question, both of which share the common assumption of a cyberian apartness when it comes to internet and video games. These approaches differ however in their assessment of the effects of these spaces. Boyleans argue for the positive effects of MUDs and MMOs by pointing out that they provide experimental possibilities previously thought unimaginable, whereas Hobbesians take a hypodermic approach by pointing out the danger of these spaces being taken as real and damaging the integrity of legitimate authorities.

The Ethnographic Solution:

As suggested earlier the best solution to the theoretical deadlock between the Hobbesian and the Boylean approaches to the problem of online spaces is to replace the paradigm of technology with a new paradigm of activity. Instead of getting bogged down in discussions that isolate these spaces as something out of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or the blockbuster *The Matrix*, which create the impression of these spaces on the internet as demarcated by a technology that requires the users to insert a cable through their spinal column. The discussion of spaces like *WoW* can be better understood by an observation of what sort of activities are actually conducted in these spaces. Instead of working on and improving abstract models that create esoteric notions of ‘cyberspace’ regarded either as a laboratory of identity and discourse or an addictive, violence encouraging hypodermic

substance. Participant observation has the means to provide a description of the many layers of activity involved in games such as *WoW*.

In the following section I will reveal the findings of my observations in an attempt to demonstrate the invalidity of both the Hobbesian and the Boylean approaches to 'cyberspace'. Instead of responding to each approach individually I will address to the common assumptions they hold concerning online games. The previous discussion has suggested that there are two fundamental assumptions both contradicting approaches share together the first one is the certainty that online spaces cannot be understood as 'real' spaces, the players interaction with the space and with each other unexceptionally involves an element of 'virtuality'. This assumption is a necessary building block for both approaches to be able to argue whether the space involved is a genuine laboratory for a diverse range of experiments involving identity, literature and economics or an escapist fantasy outside the confines of legitimate institutions where vulnerable people aggravate their existing problems that can only be solved in the real world. The second common assumption is that MMORPGs attract a certain kind of clientele who are escaping reality, this assumption in turn leads to the disagreement between Boyleans and Hobbesians concerning whether online spaces are a potential cure or a mere symptom. I will first attend to the second assumption concerning the stereotyping of players as dysfunctional youths who turn to online games to escape or to solve their personal issues and/or social disillusionments, hoping to find a therapeutic environment.

As recorded by Horst and Miller the use of mobile phones by Jamaican men to mitigate 'pressure' involves the mobilization of friend groups or 'crews' to combat collective boredom (Horst and Miller 2007 p125-16). A similar case can be made for the place *WoW* occupies in the lives of its male users who constitute the majority of players. One male player who has suffered a sport injury and channelled his full dedication to the game explained the feelings of comradeship involved in *WoW*:

I mean hockey gives you everything, if you're good at that shit you get all the girls, invites to all parties, people take care of you and etc. But *WoW* has something else, something really great, you get to meet so many cool people an you share a great teamwork with people in other countries... wouldn't wanna miss it for a thing. Owning hockey owns man, you feel like you own the rink, with 3000 people who watched you every night. But still the feel of my *WoW* brothers is something special.

Although the sense of collective achievement is certainly a principal ground for male bonding

other less competitive gamers who take pride in being more interested in the people than they are in the game itself have different methods of developing mutual affinity, often involving the consumption of large amounts of alcohol:

My guildmate John lives like 50 meters from me so we hang out all the time, we've been on vacation for one and a half weeks now, we drank 8 cases of beer and two bottles of whiskey

The way most male players describe the durable friendships they have established on *WoW* in both cases illustrates how these friendships are enmeshed in real life as the terms they are founded on are based on real definitions like 'team mate' or 'drinking buddy'. The interlacing of *WoW* friendships with definitions of 'real' friendships indicate that most users are usually not interested in experimenting with new discourses or exploring the multiple facets of their identity, what attracts them to *WoW* is the opportunity it provides for 'Cooling out' and relieving the pressure caused by the responsibilities imposed by the household or the outside world (Horst and Miller 2007 p124).

Just as the game offers opportunities for male players to relax in conditions that replicate real life it may also bring additional pressures upon them, a common cause of concern is when players form a group to achieve a common task and some of them decide to leave in the middle of the activity either because somebody else invited them for something more rewarding in terms of its potential to provide collecting better gear or because they only needed to complete a portion of the task to obtain what they wanted at first place. Such behaviour is reflected upon as an act of duplicity not different from the sort of irresponsible behaviour players encounter in their offline lives. The pressure of top performance and competition also creates additional pressures. Male players in competitive guilds are not excused for 'breaking down' in moments of defeat and are expected to 'take it like a man', those who can't stand the pressure and abandon the collective effort or vent out their frustrations in a manner that is considered to be obnoxious are ridiculed for being *emo*² and are often not welcome in the more prestigious guilds. The expectations from those occupying leadership positions (*officers*) are particularly intense as one *officer* from a particularly prestigious guild put it "The people in charge must always be strong and ready for whatever". The replication of offline expectations associated with being male implies the replication of concealed outbursts of anger in the private domain. In case of failure players who are expected to perform particularly demanding tasks due to their reputation as a skilled player or

² the term *emo* is a derivation from the word 'emotion' and is the name of a popular youth subculture.

an inspiring leader often damage their computer hardware in a blind fury, such players often reported to have broken their keyboard or mouse and even stabbed their computers, some have saved up their earnings to buy highly expensive equipment specifically to make sure they think twice before damaging them.

Although male players consist the majority of *WoWers* there is still a significant minority of female players who play on a regular basis. Female players did not cite the competitive elements of the game as a principal reason for their attraction; one female player described the appeal of *WoW* as follows:

Since I started playing WoW I can't find any other game that satisfies me as much, there's always something lacking, like a chat, fun graphics, nice clothes, etc etc...

The joy of dressing up avatars seems to be unanimously popular among female players. Two female players who made a reputation for themselves as irremediable *slackers* due to their preference for wearing their pretty dresses instead of their 'fighting gear' and throwing spontaneous parties in crowded junctions described their party preparations as follows:

A: and we got pretty dresses, we got gear... in our bags, especially for occasions like that...

Me: what do you have?

B: 'white wedding dress'...

A: 'lovely purple dress'? Eventually and the 'white wedding dress' as well... we would kick off... and I once had a whole red... red hat and a red dress

B: I had the whole purple thing going on... people were like: you're shaman wear leather... and I was like 'this is my gear when I am not fighting'... doh!

A: you don't wanna run around with your leather gear all the time or your metal gear... it gets smelly you have to wash it...

The attachment female *WoWers* have to their avatars is very similar to the relationship between young Japanese girls and their mobile phones as recorded by Kenichi Fujimoto: "a *keitai* is for them more than just a tool- it is something they are highly motivated to animate and to customize as a dreamcatcher, a good luck charm, an alter ego, or a pet." (Fujimoto 2006 p87). Fujimoto also discusses how young Japanese girls (*kogyaru*) have employed mobile technologies (*keitai*) to create a space for themselves autonomous from the judgement of middle-aged men (*oyaji*): "With a *keitai*, a girl can turn any space into her own room and personal paradise (*kekka*), whether that be her own favourite café or her own stall in a flea market. The *keitai* is a jamming machine that instantly creates territory- a personal *keitai*

space- around oneself with an invisible minimal barricade” (Fujimoto 2006 p97). Similarly, most of the young girls who play *WoW* do so against the wishes of their boyfriends and mothers who consider their behaviour to be unbecoming. Most of them reported frequent complains from their boyfriends along the lines of ‘do you ever leave your computer?’ or ‘why don’t you ever call?’ some are also struggling with their mothers who intercept their daughters’ game play by disconnecting their internet connection. Some young female players in their late teens and early twenties have also discussed their preference for “hanging around with boys”, the game provides a space where socialising with the opposite gender is relatively less complicated due to its playfulness and its disengagement from the surveillance of their mothers and their boyfriends. More mature women on the other hand tend to assume a nurturing role in the game, one user summarized her response to an employment interview concerning the role she occupies in her guild as follows:

It’s a very smart question if you think about it... I told them I look out for people and talk to them about anything, and they often get the feeling they can tell me anything. Generally I care I really do... I’m like the mommy type... I just look after people I like a lot, that makes me feel good.

Far from being separated from society in some sort of a virtual box, female players of all ages get the opportunity to discover their social roles or rebel against them, in this case the role assumed in the game is legitimate enough to be mentioned in a job interview.

Although the online space provides opportunities for women to assume social roles in real life or to create spaces where they can reject the stereotypes imposed upon them, it is nevertheless far from being a smooth experimental process that might be enjoyed in a Boylesque laboratory. The online community is not immune from the obstacles and irritations of ‘real life’. Female players who wish to enjoy a personal place where they can behave outside the confines of what is considered appropriate are often approached with obscene sexual remarks that could easily be considered as harassment, whilst more mature ‘mommy types’ are often burdened with friendships and responsibilities they don’t wish to engage with:

A: there’s one dude...I met was talking to me was like ‘u pretty’... ‘ok thank you’... and then he whispered me yeah... and he said something like in other words do you wanna be my friend but he wrote something like... like, “ü am “[laugh] “ü am” [laugh] “ü a my friend?”... I was like what? ”ü a my friend?”... I was like ahh you mean am I your friend? ‘yes’ ‘yes’... I’m like I don’t know you.... [laugh]... and then when I went away I got a whisper ‘where are u?’... [laugh]

B: yes yes yes!! Those things, they are awful.

A: where are you? Far far away from you!

The above discussion illustrates a mild form of burdening caused by the abuse of friendly intentions; it is not hard to imagine the escalation of similar impositions precisely because they are replicated in relatively common ‘real life’ eventualities.

The reality of relationships and emotions experienced in online environments is a ubiquitous concern for all players regardless of age and gender. A common cause of frustration for seasoned players was the dismissal of the reality of the emotions involved in the game on the basis that the activity concerned is ‘just a game’. The ‘it’s just a game’ argument is often used to justify otherwise unacceptable behaviour, one player explained the situation as follows:

They do things in the game that they would never do in real life. You know like cheat people on items you know. You wouldn't steal something in real life... sometimes in the game if you're, you know... err. I am not like that personally but I know people who are... ah it's just a game. you just have to keep pinching yourself and say you know... 'would I say this in real life?' would I treat someone like this in real life?

When players consider the extent to which their relationships and emotions can be considered as ‘real’ they display a consciousness concerning their public image. At the early stages of my fieldwork a great deal of my correspondences involved discussions with players who wanted to make it clear that they aren’t ‘typical gamers’. One player who eventually accepted me as a part of his very close group of friends to which he frequently referred to as his family expressed his defensive skepticism about the reality of emotions involved in the game:

I don't see why people get uptight... because it's just in a computer, this is fake, it's fake emotion. I can't relate to anyone who sees this as more than a distraction.

I was also occasionally asked by my informants if I considered them to be ‘typical gamers’ when I asked what they meant by the term the response was somewhat evasive: “well there is the typical geeky guy... who studies physics and mathematics”. The more immersed players are in the game the more they will recognize the reality of their emotions and social bonds, the more they recognize the environment as real the more effort they will put into collecting items that are considered to be valuable within the game economy or the more they will be involved in the social events and gain popularity among other similar players. Due to their

enviable position these players are often the most vulnerable to insults involving their dysfunctionality In Real Life (IRL). Players who announce their guilds achievements, their in-game birthday parties or in-game ceremonies to commemorate their friends who have passed away are often subjected to remarks like ‘u fail IRL’ or ‘get a life’. Most of the old time core players realize that these peripheral comments -usually uttered by the group of players referred to as *randoms* due to their anonymity to the rest of the community- are mostly motivated by an envy that implies an equal amount of immersion in the game. Nevertheless remarks concerning how much time players spend in the game often provoke a potentially depressive introspective process. Again the prestige and envy attracted by players in higher positions parallels offline life. Expectably, the in-game community of core players provides support in the eventuality of such insults. The form of this support may vary from private comforting to public confrontation of the offender, the increasing number and vocalicity of core players is preventing the popularity of such insulting remarks, it is not uncommon for core players who normally don’t get along to respond in unison to insulting remarks made by *randoms*.

To conclude their discussion concerning the impact of mobile phones on similar feelings of disillusionment and isolation for low income Jamaicans, Horst and Miller suggest that mobile phones can “become the means for alleviating ‘pressure’, but when overused can also become an instrument that exacerbates ‘pressure’ (Horst and Miller 2007 p136). Similar to mobile phones in the lives of ordinary Jamaicans, *WoW* offers a network of support for players with common disappointments. Most players are aware of the degree to which the online environment can reflect their real environment. A relatively common response to players who express their disappointments about familiar problems like dishonesty, duplicity or envious diatribes on the basis that they are “just like IRL” is: “don’t you just love it and hate it sometimes?” Just as the use of mobile phones is not generally considered as a form of escapism into a cyberian apartness, the same approach can be extended to online spaces, as their potential to both alleviate and exacerbate pressure are identical to what is considered to be ‘real life’. The ethnographic discussion so far responded to the tendency of the pre-existing approaches to view MMORPGs as pseudo-therapeutic spaces frequented by troubled youths. The purpose of this examination was to demonstrate that *WoW* is neither a smoothly operating laboratory of identity and discourse nor an aggravating delusional activity with hypodermic analogies.

The second assumption identified in the Boylean and Hobbesian approaches is their supposition that spaces on the Internet are distinctly separated from the ‘real’ world by their technological nature. An excellent illustration of this approach is Donna Harraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*. The argument presented by Harraway takes the alteration of the human condition by such technologies as it’s starting point. It is suggested here that the merging of technology with human agency creates a cyborg entity whose concern is not to dwell on the paradigms of the past but to solve problems of the future:

The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy (Harraway 1991 p151)

Harraway is arguing that the material condition of the cyborg existence is by its nature oriented to the future rather than being pre-determined by the past. Although the regular inhabitants of the ‘cyberspaces’ on the Internet may be considered as prototypical cyborgs, closer inspection reveals that the so-called ‘cyberspace’ they inhabit is a behaviour determining *habitus* produced by concrete past conditions as opposed to norm transcending futuristic entities. I am borrowing the term *habitus* from Bourdieu’s *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*:

Les pratiques que produit l’habitus en tant que principe générateur de stratégies permettant de faire face à des situations imprévues et sans cesse renouvelées sont déterminées par l’anticipation implicite de leurs conséquences, c’est à dire par les conditions passées de la production de leur principe de production, en sorte qu’elles tendent toujours à reproduire les structures objectives don’t elles sont en dernière analyse produit.

The practices produced by the habitus as a principle that generates strategies permitting the facing of unpredicted and incessantly renewing situations are determined by the implicit anticipation of their consequences, in other words by the past conditions of the production of their principal of production, in a manner that always reproduces the objective structures, which they are in the final analysis their product. (Bourdieu 2000 p257, translation my own)

The space involved in *WoW* can be better understood by returning to the concept of *habitus* than by conjuring abstractions like rootless cyborgs. During my fieldwork I have noted that players share a common sense of origin both in terms of their personal in-game development and the development of the social environment they participate in.

The previously explained process of *leveling* a character is the fundamental rite of

passage involved in the development of the skills required for the performance of the player's chosen activity whether it be PvE, PvP, *grinding* or even *slacking*. Players who don't know how to play their class are occasionally slandered for *ebaying* their characters, meaning they have decided to pay a substantial amount of money to purchase someone else's already developed character instead of putting their own effort into developing their own skills. Another form of denigration is calling someone a '*noob*'. The term is derived from the word newbie and is often used to define players who are not very proficient with the game, however it is also used as a discouraging remark to humiliate players who are considered to be unskilled at a certain activity. For example players skilled in PvP will call others *noobs* because they are less successful in defending themselves from attacks in PvP contexts, even players who spend most of their time *slacking* have a certain pride in their 'nice colthes' and the way they have accumulated the skills to 'pimp out' their avatar. *Randoms* also use the term as a general insult to insinuate the incompetence and the stupidity of a player. Core players who have played for a long time usually resent the use of the term in contexts aside from the skill level of the players.

well you can use it in 2 context, you can use it just as a general beginner... someone who is not yet very proficient at the game... and like I said I was a noob I was a noob for nine months... you can also use it as an insult. But I mean in terms of skills, I dont mean in terms of behavior... if you are an asshole or immature, I would probably say asshole or immature.

As suggested by this player's statement the principal objection to the usage of *noob* in place of 'immature' or 'asshole' is that most players have been through a stage when they have been *noobs* themselves: "I was really slow in it... and I remember feeling really noobish all the time... I didn't know a whole lot." The episode of being a *noob* presents a common origin in the individual backgrounds of all the players, hence being a *noob* is not something to be ashamed of but it is rather a process of learning, through which players discover their role within the game.

Due to it's educational quality and its naivety the newbie experience is also often likened to childhood:

Things have become more focused, its like a job now. The mystery over a new world is gone I guess. Like you were a kid yea,... hanging around doing your stuff, then suddenly some friends get different interests[...] Well you learn the ropes etc, the rules as well, as you get to know more people.

In terms of the lack of an official procedure for the instruction of mechanical skills or social graces in 'childhood', *WoW* is strikingly similar to the Kpelle in Liberia as described by David Lancy (Lancy 1996 p80). Instead of relying on formal education both the Kpelle and *WoWers* learn their skills through imitation preceded by observation (Lancy 1996 p86). For example skilled players with knowledge in digital video editing often prepare elaborate videos to boast their mastery over the PvP element of the game, these videos are often circulated on the World Wide Web and provide inspiration to a vast number of gamers. Although these videos are not meant to be educational their makers are often idolized as heroes, as a result their techniques and social comportment are observed and studied very carefully by their fans.

The maturation of different groups with diverging interests eventually leads to the formation of *guilds* that appeal to particular tastes. The formation, development and in some cases the dismissal of these *guilds* also provides a common origin and history for many players. The discussion of the individual development of players partially illustrates the process by which practice is learned and re-produced by past conditions. However the story of the social evolution of a *noob* from the status of a clueless person much like the Kabyle's *amahbul* (Bourdieu 2000 p26) to a full-grown member of the community is not complete without discussing the position of the quintessential practice producing social institution namely, the *guild*.

As explained before, a *guild* is a voluntary player organisation with varying forms of hierarchy. A typical guild will often have a guild master or a council of guild masters who are in charge of developing strategies for PvE and PvP progress. *Officers* or *class leaders* assist the guild master in distributing the items gathered (*loot*) from collective activities and keeping attendance, they follow guild master as second in charge. *Members* are regular participants in activities and are rewarded by being privileged in the distribution of *loot*. At the bottom of the guild hierarchy are new recruits on their *trial* period who have to prove their skills and dedication to the guild in order to reach *membership* status. Most guilds use a system called *dkp* to allocate their *loot*. *Dkp* stands for dragon kill points, it is awarded to players who regularly join the nightly *raids* and follow instructions given to them by the *guild master* or *officers*. Players who are awarded *dkp* can either choose to save or spend them to acquire the items they wish. The specifics of the *dkp* system varies greatly from guild to guild, some guilds may adopt a system of open or closed bidding or they may set a specific *dkp* price for all the items, *guild masters* can occasionally have the authority to force players to spend their *dkp* so as to prevent

them from hoarding. In advanced Guilds, where the majority of players have known each other for a long time the decision of allocating loot is given to a *loot council* consisting of the trusted *officers* of the guild, the council deliberates on who deserves a certain item the most and hands it over to the agreed player.

To avert frequent disputes over *loot* players had to construct these distributive systems within the past three years since the game's release. The formation of these systems is remembered as drastic times by most players, as a matter of fact almost all the *guild masters* at the early stages of the game who had to suffer the burden of introducing 'law and order' in the most competitive guilds have been reported to have quit the game and rather mysteriously disappeared from the radars of even their closest friends. Several of these early leaders are reported to have 'gone mental' from the amount of pressure put on them by their *guildies*. Some players have even stated that they were at times afraid of logging into the game due to the constant yelling and abusive comments of their *guild masters* over the voice chat. The competition involved in joining the best guilds aggravated the tension further, since appropriate procedures for screening applicants were not fully developed. In other words, the demand to join the best guilds was much higher than the supply of available spots and a large number of players had to go through the frustrating *trial* process. One player described the lack of organisation as follows:

Back then it was really difficult to get into a guild. There were only 6 guilds on each side with proper officers and dkp system and it was difficult to get into them

Today the procedures of screening applicants have developed to a point where reputable guilds often recruit talented players from different servers, these applicants submit an application form on the guild website and are invited for an interview with a recruitment officer to be admitted into the guild. Players aware of the increasing transformation of guilds into businesses, especially those who volunteer for the role of enlightened reformers:

You can't be the best by just going tra la la... I think running a guild is a business. Our guild master was an idealist; he couldn't achieve what he wanted in the guild. He didn't establish any rules or anything... it was all oral agreement. There were always problems because we didn't have written rules. I had to start up a web forum and a dkp site by my own initiative.

The development of organisational technologies involved in the creation of guilds is a textbook illustration of how individuals produce a collective effort to create a practice generating habitus.

The improvement of organisational and political procedures is not the only advancement by players to improve their conditions.

More material technologies have also been developed by *WoWers* to introduce a degree of order in the game. The incorporation of third party software to enable voice chat such as *ventrilo* is also a big step, there is also a wide range of player-developed add-ons that calculate in-game statistics in order to facilitate or improve all the previously listed activities.

It was really difficult. I mean stuff is easy now, I feel like this old war veteran saying to his grandchildren 'when I was your age' [laugh] 'we didn't have threat meters' we didn't have 'raid assist', we didn't have 'ventrilo'.

Not all developments in the past three years have been in the direction of improving the strictly competitive element of organizational technology; players have also legitimated ritual ceremonies that emphasize the reality of the social bonds involved within the online space they occupy.

The most widely accepted ritual is that concerning the commemoration of players who have passed away. The justifiable right of players to mourn the loss of their friends with an in-game ceremony has not been immediate. Players with an axe to grind against the person who has passed away often ambushed such ceremonies at the earlier stages of the game. The mobilization of *WoWers* to condemn and castigate such behavior has facilitated the peaceful organization of such ceremonies in the present time. At the current stage most players are confident that such a thing would never happen on their server due to the increasing feeling of solidarity:

I don't think it would happen on our server... because too many people know each other.
Too many people getting contact with each other, outside of wow as well. Through MSN or IRC³. There is too much of like carebear feeling.

This discussion of the individual and social evolution involved in *WoW* concludes a great part of my response to the theoretical assumption that online spaces are virtual universes inhabited by cyborgs with no common idea of an origin.

I have argued instead that players have a very distinct sense of collective history and are not occupying some detached cyberspace where offline rules don't apply. Contrarily, the online community has spent a considerable effort to carve out a legitimate *habitus* for itself; this increasingly developing habitus is continuing to determine acceptable behaviour for its inhabitants. The following section will finalize the suggested ethnographic solution to the

³ MSN messenger and IRC are chat programs used by most players independent of *WoW*

theoretical impasse with a discussion of the phenomenological reality of the online environment in question, in terms of the collective feeling of time involved in these spaces.

We have previously discussed the importance of the collective realization of common origin between *WoW* players, the existence of common origin inevitably implies the presence of a common notion of time to recognise the origins in question. The previously discussed Hobbesians and Boylean approaches both display an elementary awareness of the uniqueness of time in online environments, (Aarseth 1997 p156, Turkle 1997 p206, Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007 p8) although the theoretical approaches note the faster pace in online spaces, they consider the shift in the understanding of time as a technological side effect experienced by individual players, hence implying that the primary agent in the alteration of time is technology. What is being missed is that the entire community operates upon the collective recognition of a common clock. Alfred Gell's discussion of the different forms of temporal regimes employed by societies with differing productive regimes is particularly illuminating in terms of understanding how unique materialities (including information technology and graphic design in the case of *WoW*) are conducive to their particular conception of time:

Different societies or social strata, operating under different ecological circumstances, employing different technologies and faced with different kinds of long-term and short term planning problems, construct quite different cultural vocabularies for handling temporal relationships. (Gell 2001, p89)

Just like all other systems of production, the system of production involved in online spaces like *WoW* also relies on a solid system of temporal planning (Castronova 2006 p173). Hence players often have a tendency to develop an in-game time measurement system separate from calendrical measurement. For example when asked how long they have been playing, it is common for the early adopters to respond 'since the day of release' however when asked how long it has been since the game has been released they are often unsure and waver between two to three years.

The in-game time measurement is expectably based on in-game events, the principal event for most players is their *migration* to a new server. Almost all the players in the server I have joined had transferred their characters from three different servers due to the overpopulation of their original servers. The experience is significant for most players as they reported suddenly becoming a small fish in a big pond. Equally memorable is the dispute between the first comers and the new arrivals concerning who deserves the valuable resources of this new 'promised land':

In the beginning, there were people from other servers, they really didn't like us,
they were like what the hell are you coming to do here? And we were like, what?
It's not your server all of a sudden you know!

The PvE progression of the guilds is also a popular marker of time; many players refer to time periods with the title of the PvE event either their own guild or the majority of the guilds were performing at the time. Players also noted the frequent changes in the game itself to have a decisive impact on the pace of life in their servers. *Blizzard* regularly releases downloadable patches to incorporate changes in the game mechanics or to introduce new content, the changes introduced by these patches often address to the 'whine topics' in the forums in terms of *nerfing* certain classes. The importance of these *nerfs* is so crucial to *WoWers* conception of time that players who discussed what they would like to see in the future of the game often said 'I hope my class doesn't get nerfed'. The in-game facility for taking pictures also contributes to the formation of a sense of time, players who wish to cherish their in-game memories often choose to immortalize them by taking 'screenshots':

A: When I was level 30 I discovered that you can take screenshots in the game and it's just nice you know, I just take screenshots as little photos. Places I went like you know... I get a chain mail vest from a quest... I just put it on turn around and smile and take a screenshot.

Me: it's like being a tourist?

A: yeah! Just like tourist photos... a lot of the time is just cause the environment was so beautiful and you know I just took all these screenshots and kept them... I still have them on my hard drive. I got like 21 gigs worth of screenshots

Other players who discussed what makes a particular moment worth taking a screenshot almost unanimously said that it was 'just like IRL', in terms of making a particularly significant moment memorable. Some of the best pictures relating to the earlier chaotic periods of the game are especially valued by the community and are regularly exhibited on the World Wide Web forums so that their nostalgic value can be appreciated communally.

In his work *Imagined Communities*; Benedict Anderson notes the importance of temporal co-ordination in the effort to create nation states:

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. (Anderson 1991, p26)

Although the progression of time is not calendrical in the literal sense of the term, *WoWers* from

different parts of the world and on different servers can often refer to common in-game periods to determine their position in time. This shared notion of time gives additional substance to the otherwise ‘virtual’ landscape. The temporality of the online environment can also be viewed from the perspective of Tim Ingold’s notion of *taskscape*. Ingold employs the concept to describe the temporal nature of the landscape and the manner in which it is perceived as the story of the series of tasks performed on it (Ingold 2006 p190) these tasks are performed by skilled agents and they constitute acts of dwelling: “Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together”(Ingold 2006 p165). The dependence of online landscapes on the individual and communal skills of the players not only in the ludic activities but also the social transformations gives the environment the distinct characteristic of a taskscape. In essence the online space is a site of construction, where skilled players develop game related artefacts such as the in-game currency or gear but also ‘real’ social responsibilities along with organizational and material technologies as discussed above. The regular activity of building in these spaces is what distinguishes them from mere shelters for the mentally weak but gives them a status of *dwelling* in the Heideggerian sense as “to build is in itself already to dwell” (Heidegger 2001 p144).

The above section has attempted to employ the ethnographic data to demonstrate the fallacy in the theoretical approach to spaces that contain online games. The invalidity of abstract approaches has also been pointed out by replacing the paradigms that isolate online spaces as technological dimensions separated from offline realities. The following conclusion will finalise the argument by suggesting how the understanding of the various activities conducted in places like *WoW* is a better candidate for understanding the object of study than the contemplation of the technologies involved.

Conclusion

When discussing the possibility of contemplating online *games* as spaces that are orientated around particular activities instead of an unreal technological dimension, the first activity that comes to mind is doubtlessly *play*. Johan Huizinga notes how any game is by itself an act of demarcating a space that is detached from the drudgery of quotidian life by noting that play is not an “ordinary” or “real” activity but “It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ into a

temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 1955 p8), the feature of play that allows it to have a disposition of its own is its assumed interruption of the appetitive process and its occupation of a sphere superior to the strictly biological process of nutrition, reproduction and self preservation (Huizinga 1955 p9). I have addressed the problem of approaching ludic space as a pedestal while discussing Aarseth’s ludologic approach, although the focus on ludism has the virtue of eliminating notions of ‘cyberspace’ by emphasizing the activity performed in these spaces, it still fails to notice the reality of the appetitive process involved in spaces such as *WoW*. The closest theoretical explanation of the appeal of online games is possibly Georges Bataille’s discussion of the inutile. In his voluminous work concerning the necessity of excess in the formation of a truly human economy, Bataille discusses the generation of *glory* by the Aztec civilization through the excesses of human sacrifice: “A mes yeux, ce mouvement est ce qui nous anime quand nous sommes assoiffés de gloire”⁴ (Bataille 1976 p193). Bataille essentially celebrates all inutile activities as producers of glory and joins voices with Nicholas Rose in condemning contemporary bourgeois economies for sanctioning glorious and inutile conduct in favour of utile or ‘enterprising’ behaviour (Bataille 1976 p200, Rose 1998 p150). Bataille’s sophisticated account of the necessity of excess in human systems may be very elaborate and inspiring, however like previously discussed theoretical approaches, the lack of participant observation is the main problem with Bataille’s argument, hence the fictitious image of Georges Bataille trying to convince a pious Aztec that human sacrifice is a glorious act of inutility remains amusing. I have tried to argue in this paper that there is no reason to be equally amused by the sight of a clinical psychologist or a social theorist, who is trying to convince a *WoWer* that their affection to the game corresponds to either the rise of a new dawn in terms of the experimental possibilities of the environment, or to an apocalyptic epidemic that results in the complete loss of the players concerned. We have seen the abundance of the activities that are conducted in *WoW* under the umbrella of play, the nature of these activities are only available to those who are willing to participate in them as opposed to contemplate them from the outside. Finally I believe the participatory understanding of games like *WoW* is absolutely crucial to ensure the success of future policy on the field. Considering the attention given to the problem of ‘addiction’ and the increasing disputes between companies that manufacture the games and the companies that sell in game goods for real money. The necessity

⁴ to my eyes, this movement [human sacrifice] is what animates us when we thirst for glory.

of deciding on policy will eventually become inevitable, my hope is that these policies will be informed more by solid participant research capable of accounting for the diverse range of activities involved in these online spaces than they will be by abstruse theoretical accounts detached from the *real* experience of the *real* people in question.

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